University of Alberta

Empowering Youth Through Theatre: Using a Collective Creation Model for Projects that Build Communities within any Classroom

by

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Prologue

When I began my search for information on drama in education and theatre as a tool for empowerment I had no idea what I would find. First of all, I was skeptical. Those of us in the arts have often seen ourselves as the underdog, the marginalized group of outsiders doing work that we feel is important but is seen as having little value to members of other faculties. I was excited about the opportunity to conduct a study using my own students as subjects to look at the possibilities for empowerment of youth through participation in theatre and collective creation. Through my own studies of education I have gained valuable insight and informative resources about drama in education and theatre as empowerment. However, I was concerned that very little research would exist. I decided that since the intention for conducting my research focused on the need to look at the present school structure, community and the voices of those who reside within the community, that this would be a logical place to start. Additionally, since my knowledge base and way of thinking and teaching resides within the drama classroom and curriculum, I must look at literature that discusses drama in education, alternative forms of data representation, and arts-based action research. The purpose of such inquiry is twofold: so that my research methodologies as arts-based action research are easily understood; and that most readers of this study would be able to understand the climate, context and rationale behind the pedagogical methods used in a drama classroom as compared with those methods employed in a core subject area. The following pieces of literature represent only a portion of research that has been conducted in my area of interest. In fact, I was pleased to discover the vast amounts of literature

available that focuses on school climate, arts in education, empowerment and giving the students an opportunity to have a voice in a school system that is largely structured and dominated by those in control whether it be by curriculum, parents, teachers or administration.

The School Community

The community of a classroom or school plays a large role in the experiences of its students, teachers and even administration. Like individuals, schools have a personality and which often influences the experiences of those who reside within it. It is important when conducting research with a particular group of students to understand the community of the school and the perceptions of the individuals within it. Without a basic understanding of school communities and how they may influence student experiences while attending school, it would be difficult to conduct research that gives a voice to these often voiceless members of the school community.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), Paulo Freire states that

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes 'the practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 16)

Freire discusses in his book how he believes that when individuals, even the most uneducated, are submerged into an educational situation where they are provided with the proper tools, they can look critically at the world and perceive their own reality and their place within it. Freire devoted his life to help the impoverished Brazilians improve their lives. His studies in education, and his philosophies about education and radical self-awareness compare the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

> Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything-that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive-that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (p. 45)

In an educational system where, traditionally, teachers have the information that students are expected to learn, how can we not create a system comparable to the one that Freire describes? Are we creating a community that fosters the oppressor/oppressed relationship? Freire (1993) states,

> The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing their thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades. (p. 105)

Freire's fundamental beliefs about education create a learner that has a strong sense of self, of their own dignity, and their relationship to the world socially and personally. The pupils are empowered as they embody their education and are liberated from being a member of the oppressed. Freire's goals in education are similar to those of this study. I hope to take a passive learner, and create a passionate one. A community where learners feel that their words have meaning, that their point of view is valued and that they have a voice.

In an article entitled *High School Confidential*, Myrna Kostash (1989) looks at life as seen by several girls as they travel through various high schools. Focusing on the different cultures of each high school in the manner of a case study, Kostash discusses how schools market themselves by offering students not only a choice of schools, but a choice of programs and cultures as well. "In these days…students…are no longer obliged to attend their neighborhood high school but can shop around the community for one that best suits [the students]…the schools compete by offering special programs" (p. 34). Not only do schools compete by offering programs, but they attract students based on the subculture of their school. "If the authorities are the adman and salesman, the students are the consumers. Like products with brand names, schools have 'reps'" (p. 34). Students

tend to choose not only schools that offer programs they are interested in, but schools that offer peer groups similar to themselves or congruent with their interests. Clearly, the school community offers students an environment that focuses largely on the social aspects of their lives. As Kostash discusses in each of her case studies, it is apparent that students put a great deal of emphasis on their friends, social activities, belonging to the group and where they fit into the scheme of it all.

> When you skip you can do all kinds of things. Go to the mall to shop or have a coffee…Or you can get in a car with a friend and just drive around town, looking for boys…There's all kinds of things you can do at school. (p. 36)

How the students described in Kostash's article view school says a great deal about the system in which they belong. The students who were studied for this research study are not active participants in their education. Kostash does not go on to analyze her data in great detail. Perhaps she felt that the responses from the students speak for themselves. However, it is clear that her research indicates that the new trends for high schools focus on offering students a wide range of choices and programs. This may sound like it is offering students and parents optimal opportunities and focus areas, but Kostash's research indicates that students now shop around for schools, and often look at the social groups created by these alternative programs when they choose their school. They are not necessarily choosing a program, but a peer group.

In 1990, Kate Fillion described what life is like in high school in her article, *High School Undercover* (1990). Although the research method used to gather the data would not be used today because of ethical considerations, I found it fascinating that Fillion herself, at the age of 25, enrolled in a high school as a student with an agreement from the administration and the teachers that she be treated as an ordinary student with a full

timetable, with classes at every grade and ability level. The bulk of the article discusses Fillion's experiences in various classrooms with many different types of students, ranging from academic to non-academic, ESL students and those headed for vocational careers. The linking factor is in the overall culture of the school. "Many [students] work punishing hours several nights a week, and see school primarily as a place to rest up and meet with friends" (p. 41). Fillion discusses how spirit at the school is weak; only one person ran for school president, ski trips had been cancelled and most of the students spent their spare time working or drinking. "There's a seriousness of purpose about their drinking now, particularly among the older students. They aren't guzzling a beer or two in the park, they're going out to bars and clubs, some of them three or four days a week" (p. 42). Fillion goes on to discuss how the lives of students and parents are not as different as they used to be. "Students juggle jobs and school and leisure time in much the same way their parents juggle careers and families; they make important choices-how often they work, what classes they take, what they spend their money on-with almost no adult input" (p. 42).

Fillion also spent a great deal of time researching parents and found that there were two distinct camps. The first were parents who were not concerned that their children were failing courses, skipping classes, working constantly and going to bars several nights per week. The other group of parents were concerned, but often expressed that they had no control over the actions of their child.

> You feel so sorry for the parent, not being able to handle the child, but there's very little contact with the parents who are having serious difficulties. Mostly it's the ones with good kids, who want to be congratulated, who come to parents' night. (p. 42)

What, then, does this research say about the structure of our schools? Fillion's (1990) research found that "One of the overwhelming problems is not that so many students drop out of school, but that many of them merely drop in" (p. 44). With so many choices facing high school students these days, it is difficult for them to push themselves beyond their preferences. Many of the students are far too focused on the social aspects of school and cannot concentrate on their studies. Others expend much of their energies on jobs outside of school, and when push comes to shove, the students "…will graduate knowing little more than they did when they arrived" (p. 45).

Has student apathy been created by the system, or is it the changing makeup of our students that has resulted in an education system and school communities that create a student who is focused on their social instead of school work? Fillion does not answer this question, but her findings encourage us to delve into the issues plaguing a system that has created the "…shopping mall high school…" (p. 45). The strength of this article lies in individual student stories and their comments about how they see their school, the system and their places within it.

In *Inside High School: The students' world*, Philip A. Cusick (1973) looks at the socio-culture of the school's organization through the eyes of specific students and their social groups. As adults several years removed from being students in high school, it is difficult for us to fully understand what it is like to be a high school student now. We often assume that since we were all once students at some time or another, that it is simple to relate our experiences to those of the students we teach today. Whether one graduated from high school 4 or 40 years ago, it is impossible for someone who graduated from high school several years ago to know what it means to be a high school

student now. After all, can we actually say we know what is it like to be the high school quarterback, the drama geek, computer nerd, a cheerleader or a kid who has no friends at all?

> Do any of us who presume to understand, work in, and make decisions about high schools have any basic understanding or feeling for what students see or think about when they look at their school and their relationship to that school? (p. 2)

Cusick's book describes the perspectives of several different students as they operate within the context of the space.

> The justification for this effort can be stated quite simply. If we are to have any understanding of what individuals make of their lives, then we have to make a genuine attempt to see and understand their world as they see and understand it. (p. 4)

Therefore, it is up to those of us who make decisions regarding the education of our youth to explore and attempt to understand the system we have created through the eyes of those for whom we have created it. It is essential that educators begin to take steps towards understanding school communities, not how the adults see them, but how the students perceive them.

Cusick's (1973) method of inquiry is that of participant observation, in that the researcher becomes an active participant within the group being studied in order to become part of that group and to understand their viewpoints from the inside. "It can give the writer an awareness of what it means to gradually become one of the subjects, and thus he can more clearly explain that groups perspective against his own at various stages of his assimilation into that society" (p. 5). Cusick goes on to discuss how the participant observation method is often subject to criticism because the subjects are usually limited in number or selected by chance, and often the findings are not transferable to other situations and research possibilities. Cusick defends his methodology by stating that

"...men are more alike than they are different, and what is reasonable behavior for one human being in a given situation will, at least in some way, be reasonable behavior for others given the same situation" (p. 5). Therefore, a solid description of the behaviors of individuals in a certain situation can be used to formulate a basis for the behaviors of like individuals in like situations. Cusick's study uses the experiences of specific students in school. He goes on to describe the implications of his findings in relation to other schools, their communities and educational systems in general.

In an exciting article by Linda E. Lee and Maxine Zimmerman titled *A New Vision for Student Voice* (1991), the writers outline a project that is devoted to empowering students to create better conditions for student learning in Manitoba schools. The program, named *The Manitoba School Improvement Program Inc.* (MSIP) (p. 34), has combined passion for student involvement with a vast number of student-centered initiatives in order to give students a voice within their school community. The article describes,

> ...two dimensions of engagement: student's relationships to their external environment (two measures include relationships with teachers and participation in school activities), and students' personal relationships with their own learning (two measures include the relevance students see in curriculum and student motivation). (p. 34)

Using these evaluative tools MSIP goes about creating school and classroom conditions that foster student engagement. The entire process in creating schools that offer students a venue to voice their opinions revolves around the students' need to be heard and to see their opinions and suggestions put into practice. "...students will provide the momentum and energy for change if they know the support is there. You can build momentum through student excitement-and this impacts on parents" (p. 34). Students involved in

MSIP have the opportunity to conduct professional development for teachers, host parent evenings, hold school-wide workshops for student learning and often participate as members of school improvement and planning teams. Students have even gone so far as to be involved in research projects that explore improvement issues at their own schools through data collection and analysis. "The purpose of this project is to empower students to have a voice in their own learning and in the direction of their school" (p. 34). Lee has developed a model for implementing the MSIP program into any school, but states that "The continuum is not intended to suggest that all schools need to have students involved at the directive end, but rather to point out the different ways in which students can be involved" (p. 35).

Although the potential of these concepts had yet to be explored when the article was published, the data gathered clearly suggests that by allowing students to voice their opinions, educators can provide students with opportunities that will prepare them for the future while at the same time making the school a better place. Encouraging students to feel like valued members of the school community, with a voice that is heard, creates a system of mutual respect and passion for the school in which they reside. "…if we believe student learning and engagement are truly at the heart of school improvement, student voice may indeed be its conscience" (p. 35).

It is difficult to understand the full meaning of what occurs as students attend the daily grind of obtaining an education. Most of us assume that since we all attended school, it is easy to understand what takes place there. In fact, most parents do not spend a great deal of time contemplating the impact of the daily rituals on their children until report cards are mailed, or there is a call from a teacher with praise or concerns. Even

educators and educational researchers have a difficult time relating to students as they progress through a system that has been largely created by adults. In an article titled "*The Daily Grind*" (1990), Phillip Jackson looks at how the daily events of the school community and structure affect students and their experiences. "We must recognize, in other words, that children are in school for a long time, that the settings in which they perform are highly uniform, and that they are there whether they want to be or not" (p. 93). Jackson goes on to discuss how daily events, however mundane, can affect the experiences of our students. He looks at how our standardized system creates conformity of teaching styles and methodologies. Teachers may attempt to create a warm classroom environment by decorating their classrooms, but the desks, blackboards, and equipment all remain the same. "Thus, when our young student enters school in the morning he is entering an environment with which he has become exceptionally familiar through prolonged exposure" (p. 96).

Jackson also discusses how teaching styles are also commonplace with students in that they are so similar that they become familiar techniques. Students become familiar with the differences between seatwork, group work, lectures and exams. Students are expected to behave according to the structure of the class and the activities they are to perform.

> In this regard students have something in common with the members of two other of our social institutions that have involuntary attendance: prisons and mental hospitals. The analogy, though dramatic, is not intended to be shocking, and certainly there is no comparison between the unpleasantness of life for inmates of our prisons and mental institutions, on the one hand, and the daily travails of a first or second grader, on the other. Yet the school child, like the incarcerated adult is, in a sense, a prisoner. He must come to grips with the inevitability of his experience. He too must develop strategies for dealing with the conflict that frequently arises between his natural desires and interests on the one hand and institutional expectations on the other. (p. 96)

Students are expected to conform to the structure of the school and the classroom. Since we view the educational system as an institution, Jackson contends that the goal of the institution is that students will operate within it in the same way. Since teachers have more power than the students, it makes sense that this is a form of authority which students must learn how to deal with.

> Students…must often find themselves lodged within larger groups, serving as targets of praise or reproof, and being bossed around or guided by persons in positions of higher authority. But these kinds of experiences are particularly frequent while school is in session and it is likely during this time that adaptive strategies having relevance for other contexts and other life periods are developed. (p. 97)

Jackson (1990) suggests that even though the structure of the school environment and the day-to-day routine of the classroom setting can seem institutional, they are, in fact, preparing students for life outside the rigors of the educational system. Although I agree with the overall description of our schools as provided by Jackson, I feel that his defense of the institutional attributes of the school system to be somewhat unjustified. To be fair, the original research for this article dates from 1968, and our schools have changed a great deal since then. However, it strikes me that a lot of the details about the events that occur in the average school (even in 1968) have been left out of the article. For example, school dances, trips, friends, activities, clubs, and sports teams have not even been mentioned. Even though a great deal of student time is spent on learning, today's schools also dedicate a great deal of energy to providing students with activities that help them find lifelong passions, friendships and learning experiences. This being said, even though I do agree with Jackson's overall analysis, I believe that schools are made up of more that the institution. They are made up of ideas, experiences and people.

Drama in Education

My particular area of interest lies within the concept of utilizing drama as research and the strategies or possibilities of drama as a tool of empowerment for youth. The data-collecting phase of my research is concerned with the possibilities of empowerment for my own students as we research an alternative way to perform our own collective creation or social action theatre piece for youth in our area. In an article that takes a close look at collective creation, Lang (2002) states that, "The term 'collective creation' identifies both a collaborative process undertaken by actors/students and their director/teacher and the creative product of 'play' that results from that collaborative process." (p. 48). For the process to be entirely collective, as the name asserts, each participant must have a voice in the decision-making process. At the high school level, Lang insists that "These drama educators and researchers claim remarkable learning opportunities across cognitive, affective and social domains for those students who participate in creating and performing their own pieces" (p. 50). Students are given control of their creation, allowing for their own more personal interests, issues and voices to be heard. Lang's research included using purposive sampling methods which allowed her to identify questionnaire participants who had the "…knowledge, expertise, or experience" (p. 52) necessary to allow for an educated understanding of the questionnaire. In her analysis of the questionnaire, Lang discovered that many of the teachers involved in the study reported using several of the same strategies and methodologies in working with collective creation and youth. Democratic education where students make classroom decisions, group work, improvisation techniques as scene

building strategies, student playwriting and poetry were all cited as being universal in creating a performance piece as a collective. "Many teachers felt that work with collective creation allowed individual students to grow intellectually and emotionally in self-confidence, critical thinking, and risk-taking. Growth in students' self-confidence was evident to most of the teachers in the study" (p. 58). The creation of community also reflected the importance of and the value of collective creation as a teaching tool. Students have to work well together and learn to trust themselves, their teacher and classmates as the process culminates into a project ready for performance.

> As students learn to trust each other, other social skills begin to emerge during the collective creation process. Some students develop and refine their skills as effective leaders and some natural leaders also learn to be followers…the development of skills that support community and group cohesion were the most important learning opportunities for students when they participated in collective creation projects. (p. 59)

Lang (2002) concludes her article by discussing the possibilities for collective creation in the classroom. She describes how impressed she was with teachers who "…relinquish creative control of topic and content to students… live with the ambiguity of an unknown outcome (and)…trust the students to 'come through' in public performance situations" (p. 61). Clearly, the strength of collective creation is the process through which the students and teachers participate. In order to allow students the freedom to experience collective creation, Lang concludes that it is the teacher who steps up to the plate and relinquishes control of the classroom and curricular demands, and begins to create and empower students to take control of their learning. Teachers must necessarily create a safe and extremely trusting environment to be successful with collective creation. This in itself is crucial to creating community.

Throughout my experience with drama as a student, teacher, actor and director, I have been interested in studying the impact of the arts on creating empowerment through self-esteem, self-worth, meaning making and ownership. Jo Beth Gonzalez (1999), in her article entitled *Directing High School Theatre: The Impact of Student-Empowerment Strategies and Unconventional Staging Techniques on Actors, Director and Audience,* discusses the methodologies and results of allowing students to take control of their learning. "In each case, I discovered that when actors voiced opinion.... they took ownership of their plays with passionate vigor... we broke conventional rules" (p. 4). Gonzalez "broke the rules" by allowing her students to participate in not only the acting of the drama, but the casting, design and directing of it as well. Her students were given many of the responsibilities largely held by the teacher/director, and, in this case, were empowered to make decisions based on their own thoughts, feelings and actions.

> ...I had learned that students seek challenging theatre processes that allow them to learn from one another, to find the contemporary in the past, and to explore questions of gender and other current issues of student concern...I had discovered that conventional strategies circumvent most chances for directors to set up these challenges for high school theatre students. (p. 5)

These methodologies are not new to education and are certainly not held by the fine arts, alone. Gonzalez discusses how this research is akin to the "...radical concept of democratic education" (p. 5), as researched by educational theorists such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. Dewey (as cited in Gonzalez, 1999) states:

> [Teachers] can and do supply ready-made "ideas" by the thousand; we do not usually take much pains to see that the one learning engages in significant situations where his own activities generate, support, and clinch ideas-that is, perceived meanings or connections. This does not mean that the teacher is to stand off and look on; the alternative is participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher-and...the less consciousness there is...of giving and receiving instruction, the better. (p. 5)

Gonzalez goes on to discuss how Freire and Giroux advocate "co-intentional and liberating education" (p. 5) that "...engages students in dialogue, so that the students' desire to learn stems from within their own consciousness" (Freire as cited in Gonzalez, 1999, p. 5).

Framing her own classroom projects around theories of co-intentional and liberating education, Gonzalez (1999) found that

> When students contribute their own ideas, they share ownership of the production or theatre organization; they are 'empowered'. But empowerment is neither a means to an end nor an end itself. Empowerment is an exercise in self-agency, and a continual interrogation of knowledge. (p. 7)

Gonzalez describes how these theories and methodologies became the foundation of her study. Students participating in her class participated in the study as active members of an artistic community. She installed a decision-making process that revolved around democracy and empowerment through student involvement in a process that was previously based solely on the will of the teacher/director.

Gonzalez (1999) concludes her study with recommendations for teachers interested in implementing empowerment strategies in their own classrooms. While she admits that her study was not without pitfalls, she stands behind her results and includes an epilogue in which she describes how she has incorporated many of her methods with more recent classes, plays and students.

> ...I can invite students to discuss aspects of a play that remain relevant, seek relevance in aspects of the play that seem not so relevant, guide students in the writing and staging of their own plays, and search for ways to challenge-and to varying degrees, satisfy- the youth actors, myself as a director, and the audience engaged in this process of artistic discovery. (p. 20)

Shirley Harbin and Laura Gardner Salazar's article titled "*Exploring Performance Art Theory and Practice for Theatre and Education*" (1993) discusses how performance art theory can be used to lead young people into new ways of thinking in order to connect them to a world outside of the classroom. Young people today are greatly influenced by media revolving around performance and visual art, such as music videos, concerts, magazines, video games and movies. Performance art is an attempt to meld the worlds of media and theatre, therefore creating a situation where students can connect their media interests with theatre performance. As Harbin and Salazar state, "Performance art can bring theatre into their world of images. It can lead young people to new ways of thinking as well as provide authentic instruction, with higher order thinking connected to the world beyond the classroom" (p. 3).

Harbin and Salazar (1993) go on to discuss how performance art is an effective tool to allow young students the opportunity to explore theatre and social issues through images that are familiar to them. Bringing images from media that are already captivating to the students enables them to explore areas such as dance, movement, abstract and tableaux in a way that is not foreign to them. After all, being comfortable and familiar with your surroundings can often lead to effective exploration. Harbin and Salazar conclude that, "Performance art is attractive as an educational theatre activity with young people. It calls for authentic learning situations, using visual and dramatic expressions already mastered through music videos, virtual reality and rock concerts" (p. 6).

In Robert Rosen's (1989) article, *Inspiring News for High School Drama and Theatre Teachers!* , his study purports to "…examine some of the effects of dramatics activities and theatrical production on his students" (p. 16). Rosen found that significant

increases were clearly evident in communication, presentation, and creative strands when students were tested after having completed a drama workshop and production. "Dramatics activities, used first, placed the early focus on the student as an individual and appeared to help students develop personal expressiveness and confidence in their creative selves before applying those skills to the problem of adapting to characterization in theatre production" (p. 18).

Clearly, Rosen's (1989) study articulates what drama teachers have long since believed to be true: that drama is a process in which students can enhance, not only their presentational skills, but interpersonal, creative and expressiveness as well. Rosen also found that oral and communication skills were greatly increased as a result of students' participating in drama activities. Rosen's study, although it is thirteen years old, is a clear example of the value and importance of fine arts in our schools.

Yassa A. Navine (1999) studies how involvement in drama classes enhances social interaction and self-confidence in, *High School Involvement in Creative Drama*. Navine looks at "...high school students' perceptions of being involved in creative drama, and the effect of this involvement on their social interactions" (p. 1). Through observation, and interviews of several different drama classes and drama students, Navine concludes that several themes were identified as having increased grade or performance results according to the student and teacher participants.

> Some of these characteristics had more to do with individualistic traits such as building confidence, being more assertive, and being able to control one's emotions. Other traits were more related to group interaction, such as respecting differences of opinion and being more understanding of how others feel. Other social interactive skills included the ability to be democratic, flexible, tolerant of positive criticism from peers, and capable of expressing oneself by communicating feelings and emotions effectively. (pp. 5-6)

Navine discusses the findings by describing how participation in creative drama increases personal development and carries over into the academic and private lives of the students in that the changes that occurred were skills utilized in every aspect of daily life. "Clearly, it is a synergistic combination that has individual and societal benefits" (Sandock as cited in Navine, 1999, pp. 10-11). Navine goes on to discuss that,

> ...(if) these students have gained in self-knowledge and self-confidence, if they have become more tolerant of others, if they have learned to cooperate to achieve a common goal and to argue vigorously for their point of view while acknowledging group consensus, then they are on their way to being more socially adept citizens. (p. 12)

Using a case study technique, Pamela J. Farris and Joanne Parke (1993) look at the importance of drama to children as they create and recreate real-life situations in a summer education drama program. In their article, *To Be Or Not To Be: What Students Think About Drama,* Farris and Parke use a case study approach to examine the importance of drama to children. To discover "...how students feel about drama..." (p. 1), Farris and Parke ask the students several oral and written questions along with a final response question at the end of the summer program.

> The specificity of the answers of the five students and the depth of their connections to reading, speaking and 'real world' applications in school (and outside of the school) depicted the higher levels of thinking that we strive for in our classrooms but do not often see. (p. 6)

Clearly, the Farris and Parke (1993) study supports the theories that drama education is as much about process as it is about product. Students, having experienced a drama program, clearly established new patterns of social interaction and problem-solving techniques. These same techniques could be applied to any grade level and subject area, given that the program of studies is adhered to, curriculum objectives are met and clear methodologies are in place.

Another example of using drama to support personal development is the Bayless and Dodwell (2002) article , *Building Relationships Through Drama: the Action Track Project*. In this case, Bayliss and Dodwell created a project in order to "…understand if such a project can develop 'communitas' which in turn supports the development of 'membership' which underpins the concept of 'inclusion', across the disabled-non disabled dimension" (p. 43). The researchers took a group of students with learning difficulties and a group of mainstream students and joined them together to create a show performed for an audience. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in data collection and dissemination, which "…indicate that communitas and membership did occur for both groups of pupils which had positive intergroup effects" (p. 43). Bayliss and Dodwell go on to argue that this type of collaborative work should be a required and necessary part of the curriculum and describe how theatre has been traditionally utilized as a tool to support and create communities. "The common thread running through these uses of drama has been to empower individuals or groups to change" (Baol as cited in Bayliss & Dodwell, 2002, p. 47). They go on to describe how drama supports the community and

> …has a quality that is both intensely real and unreal. Latent or suppressed feelings, abilities, thoughts and aspirations are suddenly set free. New persons are born and, almost in celebration, a new collective spirit, uncommon excitement and expectations are generated. All know that this is something special, though exactly why is difficult to explain. Something is always lost in the attempt. After all, the more successful the magic, the more impenetrable the solution. (Woods as cited in Bayliss & Dodwell, 2002, p. 47)

Through the process of collective creation, students involved in my study conduct research within the drama classroom with the goal of interpreting their data and representing it in an alternative way for example, through performance. Judy R. Norris'

(1997) article *Meaning Through Form: Alternative Modes of Knowledge Representation* looks at how "…art forms allow us to provide vicarious, situated learning experiences for our audience, inviting their involvement in dynamic interpretive evolution of our texts" (p. 88). Norris considers postmodernism and compares that perspective to qualitative research methodologies and states that, "The postmodern perspective is useful for providing a means to function within the real world of conflicting paradigms and for taking a standpoint outside the current canon" (p. 89). Much like postmodernist views, qualitative research attempts to put the life back into the human experience of research and data dissemination. Norris goes on to describe the possibilities of alternative forms of data representation such as experimental writing, performance, and visual/graphical textual strategies. "Performing the text engaged the research audience in a different way, bringing the experience to the present and providing 'textured characters' and dimensions that couldn't be communicated in writing" (p. 99). Norris states that "Once we are open to the idea of using nontraditional forms to disseminate our research learnings, we can choose among forms we think can do the best job of bringing our audience to a place conducive to understanding" (p. 97). Norris concludes by discussing how qualitative research is gaining acceptance in a still-quantitative world. She proposes that

> …engaging the arts and learning from knowledgeable critics, improves our sensibility, develops our ability to perceive more amply and enlarges our repertoire of experience. These are essential conceptual tools for the *researcher as instrument*. And that would seem to be reason enough. (p. 108)

Elliot Eisner (1997), in *The Promise and Perils of Alternative Forms of Data Representation*, looks at "…how we (can) perform the magical feat of transforming the contents of our consciousness into a public form that others can understand" (p. 4). Eisner discusses the trends of data representation and suggests that the move to incorporate

alternative data representation stems from discontent with traditional methods of representing research. This is important in that quantitative data can often be "manipulated" in interpretation. Allowing the reader to make his or her own meaning also allows him or her to believe or trust in it much more. Eisner looks at how the arts and humanities have for a long time used alternative data representation as a means of exploration, evoking a response and allowing others to make the meaning. Eisner states,

> What is clear is that the forms we use to inform, the forms that display what we make of what we have chosen to call 'data' are as old as the hills; they may be new in the context of educational research, but they have been around forever. (p. 5)

Using examples from film to illustrate how understanding is enlarged and learning can occur, Eisner (1997) states,

> It is an image that acknowledges the variety of ways through which our experience is coded. It is about the ways in which the transformation of experience from the personal to the public can occur. It is about what we can learn from each of these transformations…It is about exploring the edges and reexamining the meaning of research. (p. 7)

He discusses how alternative forms of data representation can create empathy for the lives of people, authenticity for research, evoke a response, increase the variety of questions we can ask about an area of research and exploit the aptitudes of individuals who excel in these non-conventional types of research. In using forms that differ from traditional methods, we are able to understand the world in different ways. Eisner closes his discussion by stating,

> I cannot think of a more important agenda. We are, in a sense, looking for new stars. We are also looking for new seas. We are …exploring the edges. There is…no better place from which to see the stars and no better position from which to discover new seas than the view one gets from the edge. (p. 9)

Drama in education, drama as research and drama as data representation are exciting links into the realms of qualitative research. Clearly, educators and researchers

are linking together the arts as both a research methodology and a means of data representation. It is exciting to look at the impact that qualitative research trends have had, not only in academia, but in other areas as well. New ideas for research practice and mediums for representing the research collected have sprung forward in a surge of unconventional methodologies. The literature supporting such new trends is vast and varied. Such literature asks us to question our use of traditional methods and apply them, not only to research, but in the way we inform others about any type of data. Education is challenged to create new and exciting methods to stimulate, evoke, create and portray the essence of research and the humanity it is focused on. Eisner included in his article a quote that illustrates the essence of qualitative and alternative forms of data representation. It says:

> Come to the edge, he said.
> They said. We are afraid.
> Come to the edge, he said.
> They came.
> He pushed them.
>
> And they flew. (Apollinaire as cited in Eisner, 1997, p. 4)

Arts-Based Action Research

The choice for my methodology for this study was not an easy one. It is easy to understand how I would choose arts-based research; after all, I am a drama teacher at a local high school, my undergraduate studies focused largely on drama and I spend the majority of my day teaching and promoting the arts with the fine arts department of my school. In short, arts-based research speaks my language. However, as I began the process of creating my study, it became clear that in my attempts to alter my own teaching practice to better the educational benefits of my students, my research became not only arts-based, but action- based as well. Therefore, my methodology can be best described as arts-based action research.

Using drama as a research methodology is an innovative and exciting approach to conducting qualitative research. *Drama as Research: Realizing the Potential of Drama in Education as a Research Methodology* (Norris, 2000), Joe Norris discusses his experiences with drama as both a research methodology in education and a form of data representation in his article. Norris discusses how there has been a shift in educational research in the past thirty years "…so much so that the arts are now being looked upon more seriously as a means of data collecting, analyzing and disseminating research data" (Diamond & Mullen; Ellis & Bochnar; Walker, Pick & Macdonald as cited in Norris, 2000, p. 40). Norris also notes that since drama educators have vast experience in areas of meaning-making as a process of discovery through presentational and representational arts, they can offer research a different type of methodology in data dissemination. He goes on to look at how

> ...there are five, not two major ways of making meaning...in education *word* is used in the teaching of all subjects focused on language arts; *number* in mathematics, science and music; *image* with the visual arts; *gesture* in dance and *sound* in music. Drama integrates all five. (McLeod as cited in Norris, 2000, p. 40)

Norris also compares how closely drama and science classrooms are related.

> In drama classrooms, students continually generate and test hypotheses through he magic of 'what if'. Research is nothing new to the drama classroom; it is embedded in the warp and woof of our fabric. Over the years, we have honed our discipline as a significant and powerful learning medium; now is the time to move forward, employing what we have learned making our craft a valuable and legitimate research methodology. (p. 41)

A number of years ago, Joe Norris was head of a group of undergraduate student/actors at the University of Alberta who participated in *Mirror Theatre*, a theatre company which dedicated its time to utilizing drama as a research methodology in order to create theatre that empowers its audience to enact change in their communities. "Mirror Theatre has performed and published plays 'as' research and a variety of different communities have embraced our presentations as legitimate research and a vital format of dissemination" (Norris, 2000, p. 48). Norris goes on to discuss the future of arts-based research and data representation by stating that,

> Those of us using process or creative drama can inform the general research community on how to employ the techniques we use, to re-look at and examine their data. Those of us conversant in various presentational forms can assist those who wish to use those forms to disseminate their research through those forms. (p. 50)

Hopefully, Norris' predictions for the future of drama as a research methodology are accurate and we will continue to explore new ideas and new frontiers of arts-based research and data representation.

Similarly, by using arts-based methods of inquiry, Diane Conrad (2002) created and delivered a program for a specific group of inner-city high school students that integrated drama and media studies to address the question:

> What is the relationship between youth and media advertising, and how can I use drama to draw out and question students' meanings or understandings toward finding appropriate ways of teaching media studies? (p. 254)

In her study, Conrad used drama in order to make meaning for students and look beyond traditional uses of word and number to make new meanings. By using drama as both research and pedagogy, Conrad encouraged "…the expression of multiple truths and the interaction of these truths to make new individual and communal meanings" (p. 255). Conrad describes how she used the drama created by her students to script scenes in order to embody what her analysis revealed. This alternative form of data representation is suited for the nature of the study and provides a clear setting of the form itself. In fact, "representation" is traditionally associated with the arts. For my study, it will be the students themselves who will be scripting their own research on a social action theme and representing that research in an alternative way, akin to the scripted scenes in Conrad's study. Conrad used drama as a tool for not only gathering data, but engaging students in a process that allowed them to make meaning through the form itself.

Action research is largely designed so that the classroom teacher can find out what is happening in his or her own classroom, and use that information to make educated decisions about the future of their classroom instruction. Methods can vary, but the primary factor in action research is that the research is assessing their own techniques within the classroom and altering them for a specific goal. In my search for literature related to action research, it was not surprising to find that many post-secondary

institutions that offer education programs have dedicated websites to action research and the projects or studies in which members of their department are currently engaged. In each case, the websites stressed that in order to *be* "action research" the goals of the research must focus on the ability to apply the knowledge gained to the local situation of the school and classroom. Students are the subjects with whom the researcher works and the emphasis is on practical significance.

Phillip M. Taylor (1995) discusses drama as action research in the article, *Our Adventure of Experiencing: Reflective Practice and Drama Research.*

> My aim was to understand how one group of predominantly Asian American students would respond to drama structure. Drama structure, in this study, refers to non-scripted, collaborative enactment which focuses on cognitive growth. (p. 32)

Taylor's research addressed the following five questions:

1. What happens as a teacher and his students experience a drama structure in the grade seven social studies curriculum?
2. How do teacher and his students describe their experiences of a drama structure?
3. How does drama structure evolve?
4. What characterizes the cycles of action research in the drama structure?
5. What can be inferred about the drama structure and the action research process as it relates to the teacher's and students' understanding of: a) social studies, b) drama, c) themselves? (p. 32)

Taylor describes how he utilized action research techniques within a drama setting to engage students in a response using drama structure and methodologies. Taylor explored

> ...the contextual frames of the teacher and the students...[and] Since the teacher-researcher was working directly within the context, it was crucial that the voices of all research participants were revealed and accounted for. The necessity to capture the ongoing interpretations of those studied led me to qualitative research methods. (p. 32)

Taylor and his students participated in reflective practice through journal entries completed as they progressed through his class. Taylor's study revealed that five cycles

within the structure of drama and drama as research "…illustrate different concerns of the reflective practitioner" (p. 36). These include "A concern with static strategies which would launch the drama structure, a concern with social studies pedagogy, with introducing a dilemma, with a balanced historical perspective and a concern with closure" (pp. 38-39). He concludes by highlighting the principles of drama structuring and the power of reflective practice for teachers, students and researchers. In this case, by using arts-based research techniques within the realms of action research, Taylor was able to bridge the gap between the teacher researcher and the teacher who participates in their own study with hopes of changing their own practice for the betterment of their students. Reflective practice is a powerful tool for both teachers and students, and Taylor illustrates this through his own participation in his study. This is an excellent example of what I believe arts-based action research to be.

The Study

I teach at a high school in an urban area near Edmonton, and head the Drama program. Since the onset of my teaching career I have long wondered at the power of the drama classroom on my students. I consider myself fortunate to be a drama teacher. I have the opportunity to work with kids who are passionate and willing to learn about the subject. I spend my days in a classroom, playing alongside my students and watching them grow through the community they know and love. I also see students who are not always accepted by their peers in other areas of the school flourish in a classroom that promotes individuality of expression. The decision to conduct this research was simple and came from two questions: What is it about theatre that promotes this type of growth and can these same practices which lead to student success be applied to any subject area? There is something about the process, methodology, curriculum and/or nature of drama that does empower students and that whatever it is can be tapped and used in non-drama curriculum.

I decided to test my theories, and see how or what it is that makes the drama classroom so empowering to students using an arts-based action research methodology. Empowerment is an interesting word and I will explain why I have chosen to use it. I believe, as a drama educator, that to be able to study creativity of expression, students must be able to take control of their own learning. That being said, when someone takes control, that means that someone else must be relinquishing it, or sharing in it. Therefore, in empowering students to take control, the teacher must be willing to give some power away. Quite a scary thought to most of us, initially, but it makes perfect sense in the

context of learning. After all, as educators, many of us want to see our students take control of their learning, to become active participants and engage in activities that promote education on all levels. It is a student that is empowered to learn who often learns most effectively. My idea was to set up a collaborative model of education so that the idea of power becomes irrelevant or less relevant. The power in the collaborative model lies in the effectiveness of the process and the final product where all members of the community are taking part and have an active role in the decision-making process of our project.

The Cast

Having decided on a theory to explore, it then became important to decide upon the participants for my study, and the context in which I would frame it. For the past few years, I have taught a performing arts class that focuses on collective creation, or social action theatre. Every year, my performing arts class, made up of students in grades 10, 11 and 12, decide upon a social action theme, write a series of vignettes and perform the show as a teaching/learning unit to schools in our local area. We have covered topics such as bullying, drugs and alcohol, and gang violence. Students are solely responsible for decisions made within the class, and create scenes through improvisation. In fact, when important decisions are to be made, it is the students who decide through a majority vote. As the teacher, I act more as a facilitator, responsible for helping ideas flow, and moving our group along so that decisions can be made. Students monitor their own progress, and evaluate, not only themselves, but their peers as well. There is no "star" of the show, since each cast member usually ends up playing several different roles in different scenes.

It is with this group of students that I decided to look at issues of community and empowerment through theatre and collective creation. How could I examine or research this topic? I decided to use student journals as my data-gathering tool. I have always used journals in my drama classes as a way for students to reflect on the process, come up with alternatives and explore the possibilities of what we are working on. I have always found journals to be an excellent learning tool, as well as a way for me to gauge what is happening with my students as they progress through any particular play, class or program. For example, in one journal entry a student who was concerned about politics

outside of the drama classroom wrote "*...there is a dispute outside of class and the people bring it into the classroom and it affects the way that they work.*" Journaling is a constructive tool that allows students to be honest with themselves and with me as they often offer suggestions to help the class in any area of difficulty that may arise. I decided to follow each student's journey through the collective creation process through a series of journal questions. The journal questions were designed to probe each student's personal experience through the project. The journals would, hopefully, give me insight into whether and if empowerment occurs, what factors contribute to it, and if these same techniques could be applied to any other subject area. The journal questions were in-depth to probe students and hopefully receive descriptive responses. The following is a complete list of the journal questions to which my students responded:

1. Why did you register in this course? As we begin the process of our collective creation, what are your first impressions about the process we are about to undertake? What aspect of the process excites you, why? Do you have any reservations about the collective creation process? Explain.

2. As we work through the brainstorming process in order to choose a social action theme, what ideas seem to be emerging? Which themes do you feel we should focus on? Why? How do you see yourself participating in the decision making process?

3. At this point we have decided upon our social action theme. How did you feel about our decision making process? Did you feel that everyone had a voice, or a say in the final decision? Explain. What would you suggest in order to improve this process?

4. Describe some of your thoughts, feelings and ideas about scenes we can create for our performance. How do you feel about the process thus far? Is it a success? How do you feel as you participate in the class? How do these experiences differ from a more structured class setting? What suggestions do you have for your classmates, yourself and your teacher in order to improve or modify the process to better suit your needs?

5. Describe your experience when we are creating new scene ideas. Do you feel that you are being heard as an active member of the class? Why or why not? Describe some moments thus far in the process that have stood out for you as either a positive or negative event.

6. As we are choosing scenes for our show, what are some of your thoughts regarding the process we take in order to choose those scenes that we will keep and those we will not be using? How does it feel when a scene you have worked on is chosen? How do you feel when a scene you have worked on is not chosen? Explain.

7. The rehearsal process is often long and tedious. Describe how you feel the play is coming along, what areas we need to work on, and what areas you feel are strong. What is your favorite part of the process so far in the course? Explain.

8. Since we have been performing our show at local schools, describe how you feel before the show begins, during and after. How do you feel during the question period and workshop portion of our presentation?

9. What is your favorite part of the collective creation process? What is your least favorite part? Why?

10. Why do you take drama courses? What does this type of course do for you? Would you suggest this course to another student? Is there anything that you do not like about this type of course? What is the most important thing that you have learned about yourself through taking this course?

Journals, can be a key tool in any type of collaborative environment. As a teacher, I can participate in the experience of the learner through their own voice. As artists, students can use journals to tell their own stories, to brainstorm ideas, and use them as a form of expression to foster creative growth. Although I have given the students in-depth questions to answer within their journal entries, students were instructed to use their journals as a creative outlet. Students could still answer the questions and write about their fears, ambitions, dreams, ideas, and explore their creativity. *"Some ideas for the theme...relationships, grad, friendships, family and love"*. This student went on to

discuss, in depth, his or her ideas for some scenes and thematic links, using the journals to answer my questions, but retain the creative quality of their journaling work.

The Setting

I began my study with a class of 23 students in a senior high school situated in a mostly middle to upper-middle class demographic. These students are mostly Caucasian, with one student in the class belonging to a minority ethnic group. There were 8 males and 15 females in the class, with ages ranging from 14 to 18. Of 23 students, 22 submitted their letter of consent to participate in the study, with only one choosing to opt out. (This student simply submitted journal entries. They were evaluated and then given back without any copies being made for the study.) Students were given a clear description of the study, with emphasis placed on the fact that they could opt out at any time. One area of concern focused on the journal entries and the fact that they would be taken in as a mark for the class as well as being used for data collection. It was explained to the students, and later to the parents in the letter of consent, that the journal entries would be collected and photocopied before grades were assigned and the photocopied journals would be put aside until the data analysis phase of the study. The research would have no affect on the grades, since the two would have no relation to each other. Since journals are more about expression, opinions, and possibilities, students are evaluated on completeness instead of content.

Collective Creation

To understand the impact of this study, I must clarify for you, the reader, the process which we undergo in collective creation.

> In…collective creations the actors transform their communal experiences in researching the material into an integral part of their performance text: the specifics of the material and the make-up of the collective account for the different forms and styles of the various plays. (Filewod, 1987, p. 26)

Although it is performance theatre, collective creation differs from traditional theatre in that the process is ultimately more important than the product. This is not to say that we are not concerned with the performance value of the show, but it is getting to the performance phase that the learning and empowerment occurs.

> Typically…in a collective creation the audience responds to the theatrical moment rather than the development of a governing idea; the meaning of the play is a result rather than the cause of the arrangement of the material (Filewod, 1987, p. 30).

Collective creation is a constant cycle. Those artists who have participated in a collective would likely agree that the collective is never complete. Just think of a process that is ever-changing and revolves around a cycle of constant change, revampment and innovation. A group of actor/writers may begin with one theme and actually change it several times before they get to the performance stage. That being said, it is clear that the cycle of the collective revolves around the wishes of the group.

> It is apparent that certain subjects, more readily than others, can unite a group of actors into a genuine collective capable of expressing a synthesis of individual attitudes and discoveries. In a collective creation, the group mind must reconcile its differences to create a community statement. This can happen in one of two ways: either the cast is united by ideological consensus in the analysis of the subjects, or the circumstances of making the play become a shared experience which then becomes part of the substance of the play itself (p. 35).

Wherever the group goes, the show does as well. Does that mean that the collective creation process flows smoothly without the lumps and bumps often associated with the normal rehearsal process? No, quite the contrary. The process of building a collective involves many twists and turns, with the participants often wondering what will happen next. It is because of the open nature of this type of show that a team is created as individuals work together for the good of the whole. Personal agendas are put aside, and conflicts are solved in order to keep the project moving. "...the pupils engage in a wide range of activities, which broadly fall within two bands of 'intentions': the intention to experience and the intention to show" (Bolton, 1993, p. 40). In fact, it is the relationship between these two intentions that pushes the process forward. As we struggle to give a voice to our topic, we engage in a dramatic struggle of how best to portray this voice.

Before we begin looking at the dynamics that often affect and shape the creation of a collective, I will discuss the process and cycle of collective creation itself. The first step in creating a collective is deciding upon a social action theme on which to focus your show. This can be done in several ways, including brainstorming, researching issues for your school or community, or even conducting open forum discussions, noting ideas as they come forward. All of these ideas work, depending on the group of actors with whom you are working. Every year, I try to choose a process that will excite the students and encourage them to "think outside of the box". In 2002, we watched various films based on several different Shakespeare plays and then discussed elements of the plot that remain issues for us at present. That is how we came up with the idea to create a show based on cliques. The class wanted to research how cliques, or social groups, are developed, and they also wanted to look at their function within the social development

of a school. The show ended up focusing on the inclusive and exclusionary aspects of Cliques, while also looking at why it is important to feel like we belong. In 2003, I unilaterally decided to use aspects of music as a resource for theme ideas. Students were asked to bring in a song and lyrics that meant something to them. It could be any song they wished, as long as they were able to explain to the class the message and what it meant to them and their lives. Students responded to this assignment in their journals by making statements such as, *"I think that it's cool that we get to use music"*, *"I think that you have to consider everyone's type of music and see what it means to you"* and *"The idea of bringing in music with the lyrics is unique because it brings a variety of issues and ideas"*. The songs were varied (as I had hoped) and we had music ranging from country and western to rap and show tunes. As the students listened to the songs, read the lyrics and discussed the messages, one clear theme began to emerge: sex and relationships. I must admit that I was not overly surprised at our new theme. After all, sex and relationships are extremely important in today's popular culture. Teenagers, in particular, spend a great deal of time and energy focused on learning how to build relationships and handling issues of sexuality. That being said, it was a hot issue for debate amongst the class members, as several students indicated that they were unsure how a show on sex and relationships would be marketable to elementary or junior high schools. After all, how much did my students really know about the topic and what message did they really want to convey? We broke off into smaller groups, with each group choosing one theme to present and propose to the class. As one student commented. *"...people are more likely to express their ideas and opinions in smaller*

groups...and allows for more student input". In the end, through secret ballot, the students chose to use sex and relationships as our theme.

The Check-In

It is easy to appreciate how a debate of on these themes could get out of control. However, even though the debate was heated, I believe that we succeeded in allowing all voices to be heard. In a creative classroom debates can easily become out of control since all stakeholders involved are often passionate and totally personally involved in the work. I have seen situations arise where parties become engrossed in arguments and spend their time trying to get the other person to agree with them. It becomes a test of who can yell the loudest. In my classes, as we work on productions and projects, we have a ritual of the "check- in" to ensure that voices are being heard and concerns are being addressed. I truly believe that the check-in is an essential part of any classroom and can be used in a variety of situations. A new student to the drama program wrote in a journal entry, *"I like the fact that everyone can contribute their two cents"*. The beauty of the check-in is that students feel that they can be heard and that they can listen to the other member of the class.

The rules of the check-in are simple. We use a symbol to identify the speaker, usually a stuffed animal or beanbag, and the only person allowed to speak is the individual holding the symbol. It can be passed around the circle, with each member of the group taking turns, or it can be passed randomly as discussion ensues. That way, interruptions are kept to a minimum and each individual has the opportunity to have their say. As the teacher, I must also abide by these rules as well, which is sometimes difficult (but is one of the issues you face whenever you participate with your students). The check-in is an invaluable tool for the classroom. I use it when we have been away for a

long weekend to re-establish class climate, or when cast issues arise. Check-ins in the collective process serve to allow students a venue for expressing their opinions, following which we are able to hold a majority vote. One important rule in engaging in the check-in with a class of students is that as a teacher, "…you try not to appear as an omnipotent expert. You prefer to be seen as an interested listener rather than as a teller" (Neelands, 1984, p. 24). You must allow each student the opportunity to express their opinions, while keeping in mind that the desired intention of enabling each students' opinion is to improve the production. Therefore, whether or not you agree with each contribution you must value each one, thus helping each student see their place in the classroom, and the world, as a place where they have a voice. Many students expressed that they believed *"…the sharing circle is very good. It allows even shyer people to express their views, when normally they may be too shy to put their hands up"*. It was wonderful to see students who were normally shy and had a difficult time participating expressing their opinions.

Class-Based Research

The next phase of the project was about to begin! There are many ways to research your chosen topic. You can invite the experts and bring in guest speakers. More comprehensive approaches include conducting a search for articles and materials on your topic, creating a questionnaire or even interviewing people who have had an experience with your topic. For example, when we created our show on "Bullying", our students conducted informal research by designing and administering a questionnaire for the elementary schools in our area, then using some of the scenarios described in some of the responses. For the sex and relationships show, the students decided to brainstorm issues arising from their own experiences. We used the check-in format to discuss different situations in which the students have found themselves, questions that they had about sex and relationships, and the effects different relationships have had on their lives. As a class, we brainstormed issues faced in different times of our lives, we discussed issues of pressure, self-esteem, puberty and what skills are involved in decision-making. In the end, it was proposed and agreed that even though our main topic area would be sex and relationships, we would focus our scenes on making healthy choices. We realized this was a good place to start.

With our topic and sub-topics decided upon, the issues researched and explored, we had roughly 40 scene ideas that needed to be given characters, voices and life. As one student exclaimed *"I think the scene ideas we have gotten [sic] are awesome!"* In fact, the students were creating alternatives to traditional methods of data representation! Instead of reporting their findings in a report or essay, the students performed what they

found in short vignettes. The students were then divided into groups of four or five. They chose two or three scene ideas to work on and develop. This phase actually progresses quite quickly (1 or 2 classes for each group of scene ideas), because we do not sit down and script these scenes, which would take much more time. Students create scenes through planned improvisation, allowing for new ideas to be constantly introduced. The rough scene is made and presented to the class. It could be in the form of a poem, monologue, traditional scene, choral piece, or even interpretive dance. Groups can use any number of students in casting the scene, from only one, to the entire class. The idea is that once the scene idea is formed, it belongs to the class, not to any particular individual. After the scene is presented, the class analyzes it and offers suggestions or ideas to insure that our message is getting across in the best possible way. Any issues arising from the scene are noted, perhaps to be used later. The scene is then added to our list of possibilities. During the collective process, the formation of scene ideas happens many times, with many different groups. Students will work with all members of the class at some point during this phase of the collective process as an expectation of the course. In the end, we compiled a list of 30 "rough" scenes. It was interesting that many of the students commented in their journals that they were surprised at the quality of the scenes we were developing. *"I was really impressed on the creativity and ideas of my classmates"*.

Analysis

The most tedious, and perhaps difficult, phase of the process is when we get down to the business of narrowing down our scene list to about 15 scenes. The final 15 scenes comprise our actual show, and we must always choose wisely in order to ensure that our message is loud and clear. In fact, we are the ones who need to make healthy choices in this instance. Using the check-in format, we debate, discuss and analyze our work. Such analysis is a difficult job for the most seasoned actors, let alone a group of acting students. It is essential at this point to note that all of my classes participate actively in constant critique of each other's work. For example, whenever a student performs a performance piece we, as a class, discuss with them what we believed worked or did not work. This can be a difficult process for seasoned actors, let alone acting students who have limited experience. It is a humbling experience to participate in a critique. The actor is almost naked on stage as the student/teacher audience discusses their skills, motivations, characterization and anything else we can think of. It is essential to participate in critique with young actors to hone skills of constructive criticism and to teach acting students how to take direction. Students who participate in critique develop very strong reflective practice skills and crave input from audience members. In fact, it is usually my grade twelve students who have taken several of my classes who will ask audience members after a performance for a critique of their work and I know that they take the information and decide if they should apply it to their performance or not.

We spent several classes in discussions about why some scenes worked best, why others did not, and the changes that could be made to some so that they better reflect our

thematic choices. As an educator, I grasped this opportunity for all of the multiple subject areas we were covering as well as the learning opportunities that were presenting themselves. For example, in one situation, we had 3 scenes written about date rape. The class agreed that we did not want to be redundant and talk about date rape more than once. Each scene was well written, but not all of them were as strong theatrically as the scene we chose to keep. We discussed preparedness of the actors, the blocking, characterization and overall theatrical impact of each scene. This was a difficult decision as we were now looking at marketability of the scenes rather than just content. We not only had a responsibility to the audience in terms of content, but a responsibility to the audience in terms of entertainment value and a responsibility to the school in terms of theatricality and quality. Arts educators often face the dilemma of process versus product. Most arts educators, I believe would agree that process is more important than product, but we are immersed in a school system that must, out of necessity, market themselves to students. Therefore, there is an expectation of theatrical quality that must be maintained in order to attract new students to our arts programs. Keeping this in mind, we cut the two weak scenes and kept the strong one on date rape.

The discussions, albeit somewhat passionate, led us to succeed in narrowing down the number of scenes and different ideas and end up with a show compiled of 15 scenes and 4 transition pieces. It was interesting to read the journal entries of the students after we had made the decisions as to which scenes to cut and which scenes to keep. One student felt that *"...the scene choosing process is fantabulas [sic]...it makes me feel pretty happy when a scene I've worked hard on gets chosen"*. Another student commented, *"I realize that there's nothing personal about having my scene cut out"*. It

was important that we established that the reasons for not choosing scenes had nothing to do with individuals, but the goals of our collective.

As a group, we chose the music for our show, using many of the same songs brought in by students at the beginning of the process. One student assumed responsibility to burn a CD for our music. We decided on a uniform costume, consisting of blue jeans and white t-shirts. It was important to the students that the collective remain an ensemble piece and the costumes reflected the group. As one student stated in their journal, *"I feel doing the process in this manner has allowed us all to have a say. More people's thoughts and ideas are being heard, and we all have a say in each decision"*. Now it was time to rehearse.

Rehearsal

Typically, in most drama productions at the school level, it is the drama teacher who becomes the director. Rehearsals are scheduled in terms of first readings, blocking (choreographed movements on stage), characterization exercises, scene runs, act runs, full runs and Italian runs (where actors rehearse the play and speak legibly as fast as possible). Add into the equation technical rehearsals with and without actors, and you have a busy schedule. In the case of collective creation, since the idea is that the entire cast works together, I chose to work alongside my students as co-directors. We had created our running order of scenes, but needed to rework and polish them before the show was ready for performance. As a class, we directed scenes together, offering up ideas, critiquing our work and making changes as needed. We added in our technical elements when we felt the show was theatrically prepared in terms of blocking, memorization, characterization and the fluidity of the show. As Neelands (1984) states, "A group has to move to a point where they are willing to work at a subjective level of involvement in open-ended pretending situations. Successful drama does not stem from silent obedience to a teacher's authority and status" (p. 27). We worked together and engaged in critique to assist us in our directing. Students offered suggestions, and took responsibilities such as re-writing particular scenes and assisting actors with memorization and characterization. Students used their journals to reflect on the scenes and the direction we were taking. *"I really like the scene where we are rapping to a bunch of kids. Something just clicks there."* Another student was concerned about what they thought was the weakest of our scenes and wrote, *"The scene that needs the most*

work is the cheating scene because every time the actors do it they say something different. We need to script this scene!" Class time was used effectively since each student was responsible for our project and jobs could be allocated to any member of the class.

As the teacher facilitator and co-director, it is important that you allow students opportunities to explore their artistic options. This is not to say that you must try suggestion from thirty different students on one particular scene, but it is imperative that students feel like their input is being heard. We would, as a group, discuss each suggestion and decide collectively which ideas to incorporate into the scene. This process was successful as indicated by students in their journal entries. *"I like how everyone puts in their input to make the collective our own and I think it can please each individual."* This same student commented in another entry that *"I've noticed that scenes I didn't like before, I really like now. I was impressed how we've improved these scenes."* As indicated by journal entries such as these, students felt empowered by their own impact on improving scenes within the collective. As we progressed through this phase of the collective, students were engaged in improving the elements of our collective. Scenes were reworked, polished and cleaned to achieve the highest impact on our audience as possible. By the end of this phase, we were running the show from beginning to end and had incorporated our technical crew who ran the lighting and incorporated sound elements to enhance the piece. We were ready to perform for an audience.

Reiterative Process

Now we were able to perform our show for a test audience. One of the important things to remember about collective creation is that the process is a constant cycle of evaluation and re-evaluation. Another class in our school volunteered to come in, watch our performance and give us feedback and insight regarding aspects they understood, did not understand, or felt did not meet the thematic purpose of our show. We took their comments and went back to the check-in discussion, coming up with changes to scenes and reworking the themes in others that were perhaps not so clear to our test audience. This is a step in the process that we would revisit after each performance. Our collective is never completely finished, just ever-changing and developing as we gain insight from our audience. Each time we perform, we went back and reevaluated our show and made changes according to audience feedback. This step is essential to any collective endeavor as we learn and grow through the experience of performance and revamping. Collective creation can best be described as reiterative cycle; with each iteration creating a performance that remains a work in progress.

Students in our test audience commented on each scene. They asked us questions about what they did or did not understand. They listed their top 3 or 4 scenes and explained to us what worked and did not work for them, as an audience. Most of the comments focused around clarity within our scenes. Not all of the audience members understood the messages in all of the scene choices, or the point of the scene was not exactly clear. For example, in one of our scenes a male student is dating a female student who is abusive emotionally and verbally. The male student takes the verbal and

emotional abuse for quite awhile and then suddenly snaps and breaks up with the girl. The audience commented that they did not understand how this sudden switch in the male student had happened. They felt it was too sudden and that we had to create a build up where he begins to defend himself and his rights within the relationship before he breaks up with her. These types of suggestions were excellent resources for our collective. In fact, it was wonderful to see the students in the collective ask the audience members for more feedback. They asked specific questions about characters or scenes and gleaned as much information from the audience as possible. It was clear from this observation that the process of participating in critiques of each other's work had taught the students the value of the reiterative process.

After we had performed for our test audience, students were focused on honoring the comments made during their critique of our show. At length, we discussed the responsibility actors have to the audience, to themselves and to the project and several students discussed this responsibility in their journal entries. *"...my favorite part is how high school kids understand these concepts and try to send positive messages to younger kids...I think this collective will have a positive impact on our audience..."*

As we performed our show and new ideas emerged, there was a sense that we could take our production and exceed even our own expectations. Students spent class time engaged in redirecting scenes, polishing others, and enjoying the work that they created. The students were excited about performing and indicated this in their journals. *"...once the lights come up I get this rush of excitement...I love performing...it's like this energy/excitement wave..."* Unfortunately, even though we felt that our experiences in creating the show were invaluable, and our show was a success, we had difficulties in

marketing it to many of the schools in our district. Many of our usual school audiences expressed interest, but became leery upon hearing what the show content was. None of the content was inappropriate, but was perhaps too risqué for the junior high and elementary school audiences as indicated by teachers inquiring about bookings for the show. We did perform shows for several Career and Life Management (CALM 20) classes and scheduled an evening performance that was open to the public and was well attended. Instead of looking at the problem of not being hired to perform to elementary and junior high classes as a negative, we discussed why teachers may be hesitant to book a show on sex and relationships. We also looked at how we can prevent this hesitation from occurring with our next collective. Our difficulties with not being allowed to perform to classes turned out to be a great learning experience for all of us. Students learned that they must consider their "target audience" more carefully. In our check-ins we discussed out choices and evaluated what we could have done to make our show marketable. That is, the expectations and notions the age group they perform for direct the path the collective follows. As one student stated, *"It sucked not having many shows cuz [sic]our collective was good...we'll choose a better topic next year..."* I know that the phrase "target audience" will be one used in drama and performing arts classes for some time.

The Journals

Looking back through the journal responses has been quite fascinating for me. When I originally collected the journals they were photocopied, graded and handed back to the students. When I marked the journal entries, it was purely for content and to help me work with the class throughout the process. It was an amazing tool to find out where the students were in the play creation process, what concerns they had that were not expressed to the group, and the possibilities that they explored in their own words. Even now, as I read the responses, I can hear individual voices and understand the process as they saw it, based on my participation in the process, and upon my knowledge of my students. Even though months have passed since these students originally wrote their journal entries, it amazes me to explore their perspectives, individuality and points of view on a project that was approached as a large group. The first journal question asked the students why they registered in the course, what their first impressions of collective creation were and what did or did not excite them about the process. Many of the students expressed concern about how they would find their place within the group. "*...no one will like my ideas or what I think about certain ideas*" , or "*I have this weird feeling that the idea will be completely rejected and people will call me a perv...* ". Others looked at the classroom community with phrases like "*I think that it will bring people closer together and maybe develop friendships better.*" One student wrote about concerns with the class dynamic and boisterous personalities that were presenting themselves by saying that "*I wish I had a class a bit less loud. They sometimes get annoying...so do I.*" This

response clearly indicated that this student felt a lack of empowerment as the problems of loudness were obviously beyond his/her control.

The responses to their first impressions of collective creation were varied, but tended to be on the positive side. *"...we all have input...it makes us feel like we are important and that our opinion really matters. You don't usually get that in a normal classroom atmosphere."* Another student wrote, *"It excites me that like everybody gets to decide like sort of what happens and it is a lot of teen input and we can really reach out to the kids and hopefully make some sort of input or difference in their lives."* One student stated that they "*...like the fact that everybody gets to contribute their two cents."* This same student later expressed some trepidation about performing in front of a group, but ended the journal entry by saying "*...I suppose you learn something new every day."* One journal entry stood out as the student discussed what excited them most about the process we were about to embark on. *"I learn from my peers which is really important for me right now."* Students at the high school level are constantly learning from each other. They are learning about relationships, communication and conflict. Literature supports that some students see the most important part of their school career to be aspects that involve their social lives. They spend a great deal of time learning how to socialize with others in their peer group. Should classroom learning really be any different?

As we progressed through the decision-making process on our social action theme, I asked the students if they felt that everyone had a voice or a say in the final decision. I also asked them for suggestions in improving this part of the process. Many students stated that they felt that *"...everyone got the chance to speak up, but I don't think*

everyone did." Another student discussed how even though they felt that everyone participated in the discussions, they were concerned that because of the nature of the collective process "*...we need everyone's voice on absolutely everything."* One student commented on the power of certain individuals in the group by saying that the "*...majority of people who wanted to do sex and relationships seemed a bit overpowering and almost pressuring the people who didn't want to do it into conforming to the majority."* This same student later on stated that "*The system was fair and I believe we are all happy with the end result."* The majority of the students indicated that they felt the decision-making process was a good one and that it gave everyone the opportunity to speak and have a say in the direction our project was taking. Some students did express concern about people feeling pressured or not saying anything because they may have felt intimidated. It is important here to note that none of the students reported feeling that way themselves. The concerns that students expressed were focused on the fear that others may feel that way. One student suggested that the process could be improved *"...if you wrote down your ideas, put it in a hat and pulled them out randomly, then people can write their ideas anonimously [sic] and won't be put on the spot if they're [sic] idea is cut down."* Again, none of the students reported feeling *"put on the spot"* at any time during the process. In fact, all of the students commented at some point through their journal entries that they felt that they *"...did have a say in the decisions..."*

The next series of questions looked at our process as we brainstormed ideas from our own personal experiences and began to develop these into concrete scene ideas. These questions also looked at their experiences in this type of class structure as

compared with more traditional classroom styles. One student, in particular, caught my attention by the comments made in this journal entry. This student stated that

> *"...I never felt so included in a class before...I always felt like I was hovering on the very edge of that "popular" circle, but here it's like I'm as much a part of it as anyone else...that's probably why this is my favorite class now...this class is a helluva lot more fun than social or chem."*

Many of the students commented on how the interaction between the students in the class promoted and fostered a learning environment. *"It's so much more of a relaxing atmosphere. It makes you feel like you're able to be yourself in an environment where everybody shares an interest in the same class and they do it because they like it."* Another student compared a more traditional classroom setting with our student-centered approach by saying that *"Usually it is just the teacher rules all and you just shut up and do what they tell you. That can be very frustrating and then make a student even less cooperative and active in class."* Another student broached the subject of empowerment by stating that *"...we make most of the guidelines. I think that this shows creativity and responsibility within ourselves."* Although none of the students used specific words such as "empowerment" in their responses, it is clear that the students believed that they were making the decisions within the class. Not one of the students reported that they did not feel responsible for class decisions and noted a keen interest and stake in the quality of the work they were putting forward. Often, the students compared this class with classes that are traditionally linear in teaching methods such as mathematics and chemistry. This comparison was not surprising considering that many of the students in my drama classes do not always excel in those areas. Only one student mentioned Social Studies and none mentioned English in their comparisons. However, a number of students, while not mentioning any specific subject area focused mostly on teaching styles of different

teachers, claiming that most of their teachers tell them what to do and they do not have a say in the workings of their class. One student commented that if they were in another type of class "*...we would be able to give our input but it would most likely not be considered.*"

As we moved through the process of building and perfecting scenes, the students were asked to comment on their experiences in the class thus far, if they felt they were being heard and any positive or negative moments to date. It is important to note that this point in the process usually is the most frustrating since there are many ideas, but no real shape to the play. In previous classes, I have noticed that this is the same time that students begin to feel tired and frustrated with the rigors of writing a show. At this juncture on the sex and relationships project, we began to choose and eliminate some of our scenes that we felt were not working in the play. We had started off with 26 scenes and now attempted to narrow the play down to 15 plus 4 transition pieces. To do this, we sat down and checked-in. The check-in allows us to discuss each scene and then vote on whether or not it is fulfilling the message we would like to send. Each student has a chance to speak and we make our suggestions according to a majority vote. On this project most of the students stated that they *"...like how everyone gets a say in our scene choosing process"* but commented that they weren't sure if everyone took the opportunity. One student commented that *"...it's kind of unfair to the people who don't get to keep their scene...it makes me pretty happy when a scene I've worked on gets chosen"*. Students echoed this same feeling throughout all of the journal entries. All of the students indicated at some point in this journal entry that they felt very happy when one of their scenes was chosen, indicating acceptance and approval from peers. Some of

the students who were in scenes that were cut, commented that they *"...realize(d) that there's nothing personal about having a scene cut out"*. One student indicated a sense of relief when their scene was cut out. *"When one of my scenes was deleted I was actually happy"*. This student went on to discuss how they felt the scene was not honoring our intended message for the play, and really had no significant value in the overall production. Another student, (who incidentally had more than one scene cut), commented that

> *I feel doing the process in this manor [sic] allows more variety in the scene ideas and more people's thoughts and views are being heard...I feel as though I am an influential member in this collective and that my input counts.*

One of the responses that stands out most focused on the personalities and the dynamics of the group as we progressed through the project. This student stated that *"People who were very shy at the beginning of the term have become more active members of the class. I feel that everyone is very open to new suggestions... "*. This observation could be attributed to the growing class climate as the students became more comfortable working with others in different grades and from different social groups within the school. However, I attribute the growing comfort of this group to the nature of the project and the open structure and development of our collective.

My next set of questions looked at performance, before and after each show. I wanted to know how my students felt before they walked on stage, while they performed and then after they were done. I also asked them to discuss their favorite things about the process and look at the negative moments that they may have experienced. The majority of the students commented on how they felt nervous before a performance, but relaxed and became energized by the time the show ended. *"Before the show I feel somewhat*

bored...but once the lights come up I get this rush of excitement...when the audience laughs at one of your jokes, it makes you feel so good inside, like you've accomplished something". All of the students commented that they felt some type of nervousness or anxiety before the show began. One student described this excitement by stating that *"...it's like this energy/excitement wave... "*. Many of the students also commented that they felt more anxiety if they did not do a good job and this motivated them to work harder on scenes that were weaker in order to improve their performance. *"...when we did a good job I felt great...if we did a bad job I felt crappy... "* . Most interestingly, the fact that something did not work became a key motivating factor for the students during the debriefing. The group then engaged in finding a solution and those actors in that particular scene appeared to be dedicated to correcting the scene problem.

This same set of entries also asked the students to identify their favorite and least favorite parts of the collective process. Although the majority of the students commented on the performance aspect being their favorite, several others discussed different parts of the process that they enjoyed. *"My favorite part of the collective creation process was when we go to see each others ideas... "*. Another student commented on the theme of ideas by describing their favorite part as *"...seeing the crazy crap in my head come to life"*. When looking back on the entire process from start to finish, one student stated *"I really liked listening to all the different kinds of music people liked. It was kinda [sic] a good way [to] get to know everyone. A little insight on what they are like"*. The least favorite aspect of this process for several of the students was the point where we had to narrow down and cut scenes from the play and narrow down our decisions. One student offered a suggestion in his/her entry. *"If people like the scenes that are getting cut, then*

maybe we could've rethink [sic] about cutting that particular scene". Another student noted that we ended up not being hired for a great deal of the shows. *"...it sucked not having a lot of shows because we worked hard on putting this show together and then to hear that nobody wants to come and see it was like a self-confidence lowerer [sic]".* This comment does show empowerment since it caused the student to look at why the project is important, even if others choose not to see it. If the student thinks that what he/she did was right, and if he/she believes in it is a major act of self-empowerment. A new student to the program, regardless of our limited number of shows said that *"...the feeling of teamwork I got while we were doing the scenes; going through them and analyzing them...it was like the whole class was one collective body thriving only to strengthen its image. Pretty cool if you ask me!"*

The last section of journal questions asked the students to: 1) describe their reasons for taking the performing arts class; 2) indicate whether they would suggest the program to other students; 3) make suggestions for course improvements; and 4) ask them to discuss the most important things they learned about themselves. Roughly one-quarter of the class had taken Performing Arts in previous years, and indicated that they enrolled in the class because they had enjoyed it in the past. Students new to the program indicated either an interest in a "different" type of drama class or that they needed an elective and this class was the only one that remotely interested them. This reaction is not surprising, since timetable scheduling can always be a difficult task for students. All of the participants in the study indicated that they would definitely recommend the course to a friend and many added that they had already done so.

Suggestions for course improvements were few. Most suggestions were about choosing more marketable material so we get more shows, while others were concerned with the scene choice process. At the same time, the students agreed that there really was no better way to deal with the process. Perhaps the most intriguing responses in this set focused on what the students had learned about themselves through the course or process. Several students described how they found a new passion for acting and writing and were looking at theatre as a possible career choice. Others looked at how they *"...have learned what its [sic] like to be working with a big group, where everyone's equal"* and *"...how important it is to give new things a chance... "*. Another student noted *"...that no matter how loud, outgoing or shy and quiet, people will still recognize you and be friendly to you"*. One student wrote that *"I have learned to be independent and not be afraid to be me"*. This student went on to say *"...I like the fact that I can come into this class and know I won't be judged for being me"*. Another student commented on their shyness and how *"...I have become a much more outgoing person-even in everyday life, because of this class"*. These successes only help reinforce the positive effects that school experiences have on the lives of the students. Students commented on learning how to *"express"* themselves, *"speak their minds"* and increase their *"self-confidence"*. One student noted how they learned how to *"...push myself to the limit at leading people."* Another described how the course *"...really helped me realize that I shouldn't care what other people think, and that I should be myself no matter what anyone says"*. This student closed his/her journal entry by writing *"I've learned a lot about myself this year...the class has helped me realize who I am... "*. These statements say a great deal about the

experiences of the students involved in the collective creation process. However, were they empowered?

Implications of Findings

Months later, after having read literature and taken a step back from the initial research phase of this study, it has been interesting to delve into issues of empowerment and its measurability. My first instinct is to say, "Of course my students are empowered! They were totally engaged in this project and the outcomes far exceeded my earlier expectations!" However, I would be remiss in my duties as a researcher if I didn't fully analyze the data I have collected and remove my emotional ties, or at least attempt to. I have always believed that learning is deeply tied to and entwined with the physical and emotional factors of students, and that, when empowered, students engage in learning with not only their minds but with an emotional and physical response as well. I found that the students were highly engaged in all of these areas, particularly on an emotional level. Statements such as "*…it makes us feel…*", "*…I have never felt so included in a class…*", "*…you're able to be yourself..*" and " *…responsibility within ourselves…*", demonstrate how the students felt as we progressed through this project. One student in particular caught my attention on several occasions with his/her journal responses. This student was a reluctant participant early on in the semester. Not often volunteering, last to join in on games, and withdrawn when discussions arose, the student was hovering on the outside of the class dynamic. As the weeks progressed, I noticed a dramatic change as this student began to participate in all levels of the course. The biggest change came in the form of a response to a journal question, asking the students to describe their experiences in the class so far. This student wrote,

> *…I never felt so included in a class before…I always felt like I was hovering on the very edge of that "popular" circle, but here it's like I'm as much a part of it as*

> *anyone else...that's probably why this is my favorite class now...this class is a helluva[sic] lot more fun than social or chem.*

This student, who began as a reluctant member of the class, eventually became one of our most passionate leaders in the course, offering new and creative ideas, attending class and never missing a rehearsal or performance date. This student took control of his/her learning and engaged him/herself as "part owner" of the project. In his/her last journal entry, this student responded to a question asking students what they thought was the best aspect of the course. This student wrote,

> *...the feeling of teamwork I got...it was like the whole class was one collective body thriving to strengthen its image. Pretty cool if you ask me! ...which is the reason I came to almost every class instead of going out....*

For students like this one, is it the passivity of the regular classroom setting that makes them feel like they do not have control over their learning? This student indicates that the teamwork, acceptance of ideas, inclusion into the workings of the class and the decision-making process contributed to their increasing engagement in the course material. So does that mean this same student, in a math or science class that was taught in the same style, would have the same effect? I believe that it would.

In the chapter discussing journal writing, I have included many examples of student responses to my questions throughout our collective process. The students never discussed curricular material as it exists in the Program of Studies. Not once did a student respond by discussing the elements of Speech, Movement, Stage Make-up or Acting. The students were most certainly learning this material as was made evident by their performance evaluations that graded students on all of the areas pertinent to the curriculum. They learned the curriculum, but it was not as important to the participants as relationships, leadership, group-dynamics, decision-making, and the personal investment

they had in the collective creation process and the ever-changing show. Students discussed how they learned to "*express*" themselves, "*take on a leadership role*", increase their "*self- confidence*", and "*push myself to the limit*". These learning experiences are invaluable, and, in terms of performance and curriculum evaluations, pushed the participants into a higher level of excellence that could easily flow into other subject areas, and their world outside of school. Other teachers commented that individual students seemed to excel in areas outside of the drama class that required leadership skills. As a teacher, I was excited about the final grades of this class, as, for the first time, I did not have a single student in this group achieve a final mark that would cause them to fail the course or not achieve the mark requirement for prerequisites in higher levels of the performing arts program. However, this is a secondary result of the collective creation project, since I feel that the real learning occurred through the participants' interactions with each other. They became not only active members in the classroom but learned how to become active members of our society, both within and outside of the school. Their learning experiences will possibly carry over into other courses, relationships and future endeavors. Another study would have to be conducted with this same group of students in the future to know the full extent of the impact of their participation in the collective creation project.

Reviewing the responses of the participants within the study, I do feel that the students were empowered in their learning, taking control of the collective creation project, and pushing themselves in all aspects of teamwork and course curriculum objectives. However, there is one place where I do not believe that empowerment occurred immediately. It struck me as interesting, as I read through the journal entries, at

how often students asked me to assist in dealing with personality conflicts with other members of the class, the noise level, and certain students who came across as "bossy" when we held our check-ins. It was interesting that these same students felt empowered towards the project, their own skills, and their individual growth in regards to self-esteem, self-confidence and teamwork skills, but had difficulty addressing these same issues in their dealings with some of the other students. Relationships outside of the drama classroom seeped into our project from time to time. The students, instead of taking charge and dealing with the conflicts on their own, repeatedly asked me as the teacher, to tell them what to do, or to step in and dictate appropriate behavior, or for suggestions on how they should handle the situation. One student, after describing a problem they were having with another member of the class, wrote, *"The reason I have voiced these thoughts is because they are hindering my participation in this class...what do you suggest for this..."*. In each situation, in my responses to their journal entry, I gave the student suggestions for dealing with the problem in a proactive way. I decided that since I was creating an atmosphere that gives the students control of the workings of the classroom that I would offer advice and suggestions, but try not to interfere in a participatory level. I hope were that the students would become empowered through using my advice and taking control of the situation themselves. This idea worked, and even though I was not present when the students took my advice, I noticed that dynamics between particular individuals began to improve with every suggestion I made. One student, after receiving some of this advice wrote, *"I may be able to talk to them, but I don't know how they will respond...I'll let you know in my next journal...thanx [sic] tons..."*. A couple of journal questions later, this student wrote in a postscript, *"I have*

begun to work things out...". Even though the students were not empowered to act on their own, they became empowered through the advice provided, enabling them to address the situation themselves. I must admit that I was surprised at this finding. Before conducting the study, I thought that empowerment would first show itself within the interactions and relationships between the students, and secondly with personal and individual growth and embodiment of the curriculum. As I look back, it makes much more sense that personal empowerment occurred first, and as the students became more aware of their growth, and the strength in their abilities that they began to address relationship difficulties with other members of the class.

In a more indirect manner, empowerment also occurred as each student progressed through and increased their knowledge of curriculum objectives as outlined in the Program of Studies. This empowerment is more of an indirect result of the collective creation project. That is, because students became empowered to immerse themselves wholeheartedly into the project physically, emotionally, and mentally, they achieved a higher rate of learning than if it had been taught in a more teacher-centered environment. In fact, if you were to ask the students to list all of the factors that make up quality speech projection, for example, they would be able to answer correctly, but would be unable to tell you exactly when or how they learned the information. As we created our collective, we were constantly learning curriculum objectives that were entwined into and throughout the bigger project, which was our main focus. Learning took place because students were empowered to make the collective as good as we could, and greater value was placed on all of the factors (curriculum objectives) that could make our writing, acting, speaking, movement, and our performance even better. The students were

learning the material because it was applicable to their daily lives in the form of a project they felt passionate about. Empowerment is a byproduct of responsibility. That is, if one's responsibility is only to oneself, than there is little empowerment because there is no social context to measure one's degree of influence. However, if the individual is in a situation where he/she is responsible to other members of a collective community, to an audience, and if the individual meets this responsibility with as much as he/she is capable, and he/she believes in the work, then empowerment is a product of an environment he/she helped to create. In this case, the students were responsible members of a community, they had responsibility to an audience and they met the responsibility with a high standard of work and dedication. Empowerment was a product of the environment that each individual in the collective community helped to create.

Drama as Empowerment: A Teaching Strategy

When I set out to begin this research project, I hoped to be able to develop empowerment strategies for teaching that could be used in any classroom, not only in drama. My findings indicate that through development of our collective creation, students were empowered as they took responsibility for the creation of our project. They learned about themselves, how to work as a group and the power of collaborating on a goal as a unified team. Although the course was Performing Arts, and the objectives and expected student outcomes are different than, say, a Pure Math 10 class, these same techniques can be applied to empower students to take control and direct their own learning. This, I believe, can result in not only a happier and healthier learner, but learners with more retained knowledge and, thus, higher grades (demonstrated in the Performing Arts class) as indicated through this study. In the journal responses, students never discussed actual curricular objectives, and factual knowledge they learned throughout the collective creation process. The responses were about how the students were learning to direct their classroom experience in relation to the course material, the increasing passion the students felt about the project and the relationships they built within the process of the collective creation. The result was a passionate student, engaging in classroom activities physically, emotionally and mentally. Many of the students indicated that the biggest difference between this style of learning as compared to more traditional classrooms was that they were in control of their own learning. They made the decisions and decided when we needed change. The entire class focused on democratic vote, with the instructor becoming a participant in the process along with the students. This same format can be

used in any setting where there is an expectation for learning. The roots of this technique exist in the democratic structure, and the responsibility the students can feel for the project, their learning community, and their audience. The learner partially becomes the educator, making decisions that affect their own lives. The material then becomes applicable, and the students are able to use the information on a day-to-day basis. At this point, students make a transformation from being empowered to becoming embodied, as they take their learning into the world in which they interact. As students embody their learning, it forever changes their perceptions, reactions, and dealings within the experiences of their lives. The learning is generalized and applicable to their lives.

How can teachers use this technique in classes that are not arts-based? The answer is not an easy one. In today's educational system, many teachers feel pressure to teach to exams, such as achievement and Diploma exams at the senior high school levels. Achievement exams put a great deal of pressure on teachers who would like to spend more time on certain topics, but are unable to do so because of tacit demands of the exams. Traditional teaching methods become a "fail-safe" technique that compensate for time constraints. Students often find themselves in courses where they spend a great deal of time sitting in desks, listening to lectures, taking notes, and writing exams. The pursuit of education becomes a lonely battle in which students with varied learning styles often cannot compete. We are then creating passive learners who are not actively taking ownership of their own education.

How does a teacher in a subject area such as math or science use techniques most commonly found in the arts? In order to use the collective creation approach to a classroom, the teacher must begin to look at learning in a different way. Instead of

focusing on teacher-centered and directed learning, the teacher must understand that in order for students to learn most effectively, the student must be able to make meaning from the information they are learning. That is, the student must be able to apply the material to their everyday lives. The material is connected to their own experience, and more easily retained. Neelands (1984) states,

> Children show us, before they come to school and also later on when they tackle learning tasks out of school, that they learn best by making and doing. We can also see that children, habitually, use their existing experience as a means of making sense of new experience/information, and that if we give them the opportunity to build these bridges between what they already know and the new learning presented by the school, we are also giving them status as learners and enabling them to refine their own ways of learning; we help them to learn how to learn. (p. 2)

Instead of giving students factual information and expecting them to retain, memorize and then repeat in tests, teachers can educate their classes using techniques designed to show students concrete applications for the material. Students must feel a sense of shared responsibility in their learning.

One of the most important steps in creating the collective atmosphere in any classroom lies within the choice of your project or topic. It is imperative that, as a teacher, one chooses a project that is applicable to the lives of the students. Provide students with projects that promote discussions about their lives and as a class community, search for topics or themes that are relevant and applicable to them. For example, in an English class, students may discuss how they would like to increase awareness of great literature amongst their peers. They may decide to host a film festival based on great literature as a way to increase literary awareness. Students must see how their work can benefit, not only themselves, but the school or community as well. The more applicable the project, the more empowered the students will become. The journal

entries of my students demonstrate that they felt passionate about what they were learning because they felt that the experience throughout the process, not only changed the way they viewed themselves, but the way they viewed the classroom experience. They also felt that their work would have an impact on others. The stronger the project applied to students' lives, the stronger the passion and the empowerment.

After you have allowed the students to decide where they will focus their collective project, they must begin the research phase. Make sure that your students understand the topic they have chosen by having them create research methods to gather information. The students, usually in small groups, choose a topic or sub-topic within the scope of the project to focus their research. They can use library or Internet resources, textbooks, interviews, questionnaires, and even methods such case study or ethnography. After compiling their research data and results, students will present their findings to the class, educating each other with new aspects of the topic for the project. Again, students are in control, they learn from a hands-on approach then educate the rest of the group about what they have learned. After all of the groups have presented and taught their findings to the class, it is time to synthesize the data. As a group, the students sort through the material, they find common groupings, perhaps create new ideas, and eliminate others. One is left with a more workable list of possibilities with which to take one's project. The group can now move into a phase of exploration. Take a look at all of your ideas and translate them into workable material that feeds your main project or goal. Ideas are elaborated upon and given a concrete shape and form. At this time, specific students may take more interest in certain aspects of the project. This works well but the students must understand that no decisions can be made without the express consent of the group.

It is now time to move into the refining portion of the collective process. The group looks at all of their choices regarding the shape and scope of the project. Here, old ideas are explored, revamped or even put aside, while new ideas may be implemented as the need arises. This is a difficult phase of the project and it is essential that students understand that ideas may be deleted, not because of lack of merit, but because the work does not feed the needs of the entire project and its goals. When finished the refining phase, the group easily can work into what we call in the theatre world the "scripting phase". Final choices, having been made, are put onto paper so that a visual account of the project can belong to each member of the group. Roles are clear, and each individual knows what is expected of him/her. The group then rehearses each portion of the project. For example, if your Science 10 class has been working on a proposal for an environmentally friendly school and is expected to make a presentation at a school meeting, then rehearse what each member of the class is to say during the presentation. You may have two students in charge of discussing the research they have gathered indicating that the school is environmentally unfriendly, a group to hand out printed information, another group that presents ideas to solve the problem, another group that answers questions and a final group that closes the presentation. All of this must be rehearsed in order to guarantee a fluid and meaningful presentation.

One would think that the last phase of using the collective creation model as a process to empower learning in students would be the actual presentation or performance of the project where the responsibility of each member to the audience is complete. However, this stage acts more as a tool for evaluation of the effectiveness of the project itself. If the Science 10 class that created a program to create an environmentally friendly

school presented their proposal at a council meeting, and was successful, they could still re-evaluate their project and make changes according to feedback from the council meeting. Their next step would be to revamp their project and present their newest model of the environmentally friendly school presentation at, perhaps, a meeting with the school district (the idea being that the collective process is a constantly changing cycle of evaluation and re-evaluation). The project becomes stronger, and the students constantly engage in a reflective model of education. Akin to processes used in fine arts courses, students have the opportunity to make decisions about their learning. Students work in a collaborative classroom community and learn the value of their opinions, ideas, and personalities. Much of the learning takes place when students begin to see the power of their own voices and the strength of those voices when working together. Students can use their creativity to solve problems and think about projects with a broad scope.

Suggestions for the Teacher

In order to make the collective creation process a success, you must study your own teaching style and evaluate how much of your power as the leader in the classroom you are willing or able to give away. This is one of the most important factors in enabling your classroom to become a collective learning environment that empowers students to actively participate and learn. If you are not comfortable as a teacher in allowing students to control where the learning takes your classes, the collective process will not be a success. As indicated by the journal responses, the students felt valued when they had a say in the workings of the class. Students felt that they were learning from their peers and expressed being valued as members of the community without judgement. As a teacher, you must provide decision-making opportunities for your students in regard to their learning. Students feel valued, in control and members of the community when they can direct their own learning paths. Even though the main project for the collective creation was chosen beforehand, all of the choices within the scope of the project were made by the students. They chose the direction their learning was to take and became empowered as they felt the control they had within the project. This tool can be used in any type of classroom and for any subject area. The instructor chooses a broad project that has a concrete application, and the students take control of the directions this project will take. As the teacher, even though you have given much of your decision-making power to your students you act as facilitator, keeping conversations on topic and ideas moving along.

Working on this type of project lends itself easily to using reflective practice in the classroom. I found that using the journals created endless opportunities for gauging how

my students were responding to each phase of the project. It was an excellent tool in facilitating the group in the decision-making process and allowed me insight about where the students were in relation to their individual empowerment journeys. There are many different styles of reflective practices that can be incorporated into a collective process. Journaling, checking-in, video diaries and peer interviews all offer alternatives for reflective practice. It is important to choose a method that is not only comfortable for the teacher, but the student as well. It is also imperative that students are given instructions about reflective practice and the importance of the process. For example, you might explain that a reflective practice tool such as a journal is a place for them to explore their own experiences as they progress through the course. It is a place for them to express their ideas and feelings and explore their thoughts and ideas. It can be used to help solve conflicts and issues as they arise. Students can explore their own styles of learning and explore ideas that do or don't succeed. If students are not familiar with reflective practice, they may not understand the process and the places it can take each individual, and then the group as a whole. Reflective practice is a tool that can be used in every classroom and in any subject area and is a necessity when using the collective as a framework for class projects.

One of the most important lessons that I learned throughout the collective process was to harness as many learning opportunities as possible. Teachers often become so preoccupied with learning outcomes and lesson plans that we do not identify and respond to those precious little moments that offer themselves on a daily basis. Some of our best learning moments did not come from a lesson plan! They came from the students – their comments, ideas, and the directions in which they took our project. As a teacher, you

have to be willing to allow the students to direct their learning. As a facilitator, you are still responsible for keeping the students focused on the project, but need to allow the students to delve into topics that are intriguing to them, as they arise. Trust the learning opportunities to cover the requirements of curricular objectives. Not only will your material be covered, but your students will be learning valuable lessons that they can use in other aspects of their lives. Even if a project is not successful in terms of group expectations, it can still be an amazing learning opportunity. Our collective creation on sex and relationships did not garner the audience numbers that we had hoped. Instead of focusing on the fact that we did not have a huge audience, we looked at issues of target audience and marketing. Great lessons were learned from these analyses, and the students left the course with a greater understanding of which issues attract school audiences and which issues do not. Students felt that they had a voice that was heard and not judged by other members of the collective community. They felt a responsibility to themselves, their school, the project and their audience throughout each phase of the project. These students were active participants in their learning as they were empowered by their belief in their work. It was important, in this situation, to harness the learning opportunity as it was presented to us. Neelands (1984) states,

> A process centered education provides an authentic mirroring of 'real-life' learning where new problems are synthesized through structures and methods formulated to enable effective discovery…The purpose of process-centered learning is to enable children to discover, for themselves, new meanings-not to inculcate tired, well-worn meanings as in the case of content-centered education. (p. 4)

Curtain Call

The process of studying my own students within the context of empowering their learning through collective creation has been a fulfilling one. As I look back at my research and findings, I realize that not only were my students empowered as they embodied their learning experiences, but I was as well. It was stimulating to step back into the role of a student as I actively participated and learned alongside those in the class. It has been several years since I walked the hallways of a high school as a student, and it was a welcome experience. Even now, as I teach several of the same students who participated in the study, I feel a connection to them that I do not believe would exist had it not been for the student-centered learning environment created by the collective creation project. As is a goal in education-based action research, I believe that my teaching style has been changed for the better. I often find myself thinking of new ways in which I can actively participate in projects alongside my students, instead of focusing on a more teacher-centered technique. The passion I felt for the ":sex and relationships" collective creation project has strengthened as I teach a new group of students using the same format. Empowerment *did* occur for every member of the group I studied and had an impact on the way we all began to look at the teacher-student relationship.

Early in the literature review phase of my study, I read many articles on how students do not actively participate in their education and learning on a daily basis. It was disheartening to read study after study that reported students simply choosing high school for the social life. I have regained my trust in education and educational reform that changes the way we view students and the way we allow them to learn. The participants

in my study exemplify the power of opportunity and the ability for young people to make concrete decisions about the directions their learning should take. These same students, in a new year with new classes, have all demonstrated examples of empowerment and embodiment of their learning. Teachers and parents have reported that many of the students have become leaders in other classes, and I see, on a daily basis, how they have become outspoken and driven leaders in my own drama program. Teaching through the arts is an effective method with the benefits that fine-tune slowly but remain intact. I caution teachers who wish to use the arts as a learning tool not expect immediate efficiency, but to look towards the future and see how adding arts into regular classroom learning can have long-term effects. As I embark on a new school semester, I look forward to continuing to teach using the collective creation model as a tool to engage students and empower them to become active participants who take ownership and control of their learning.

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